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SUBJECT: ASHRAF GHANI SOUNDS OUT THEMES FOR POSSIBLE
PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

Classified By: Political Counselor Alan Yu for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C/NF) Former Interior Minister Ashraf Ghani has launched a high-minded, academic critique of the Afghan government, blasting administrative incompetence and President Karzai's refusal to fight high-level corruption for destabilizing the country. In a Dec. 31 conversation with PolCouns, Ghani said he has been holding meetings during his periodic trips to Afghanistan since July and has determined there is a "negative consensus" concerning Karzai's performance. Ghani has not committed himself to run for the presidency, but his language suggests he is seriously considering the option.

¶2. (C/NF) Ghani worked as a project director for many years at the World Bank. He served as Afghanistan's Interior Minister from 2002 to 2004, then took the position of Kabul University chancellor for a short time. He now runs the Institute of State Effectiveness, a think tank in Washington. Ghani was also a dark horse candidate in 2005 for UN Secretary General, a position eventually won by Ban Ki-moon. His name emerged last year as one of the more prominent potential challengers to Karzai. The international community knows Ghani well, while his connections to his native Logar province could chip away at some of Karzai's Pashtun support base. However, we have seen little grassroots-level support for a Ghani candidacy. Ghani's patrician manner and his lengthy exile in the West give many Afghans the image of a leader out of touch with the plight of ordinary citizens. His short terms as finance minister and university chancellor also leave many Afghan critics with the impression of someone unable to finish a job.

¶3. (C/NF) Ghani will return to Afghanistan in a few weeks to visit the country's provinces and continue his "dialogue" with ordinary Afghans. In addition to corruption, he cited several challenges requiring immediate action, including the drought in northern provinces, highway security, and criminality in provinces near Kabul. He welcomed U.S. plans to increase troops here, but at the same time argued ISAF and the government had to shift the counter-insurgency approach much more to a law-and-order orientation. Ghani has told local media he will organize task forces of supporters and national figures to address each of the country's chief problems.

¶4. (C/NF) In our conversation and in recent media interviews, Ghani ran through the problems of Afghanistan in a high-minded, often wandering, academic manner. It's a style unlikely to win Afghan voters, who are eager for solutions. Ghani's proposals for more task forces and "listening tours" do not give voters the man of action for whom they are still searching.

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